



Donald A. Hagner, *The New Testament: A Historical and Theological Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic), 2012.

Hagner's massive volume is made up of eight large 'parts':

Part 1: Introduction and Background (pp. 3-58).

Part 2: The Gospels: The Proclamation of the Kingdom (pp. 59-306).

Part 3: Acts: The Earliest Preaching of the Kingdom (pp. 307-344).

Part 4: Paul and His Epistles (pp. 345-584).

Part 5: The Deutero-Pauline Letters: Extending the Teaching of the Apostles (pp. 585-644).

Part 6: Hebrews and the Catholic Epistles: Non-Pauline Christianity (pp. 645-744).

Part 7: The Apocalypse: The Consummation of the Kingdom (pp. 745-782).

Part 8: The Text and Canon of the New Testament (pp. 783-824).

The tome also includes the usual and expected indices and introduction. Each chapter (of which there are 43) ends with a bibliography as well. Finally, ten illustrations are included.

The first questions which may naturally arise is 'why another introduction? Don't we already have enough introductions and even if we don't, can something new really be said?' And to be fair those are both legitimate points of enquiry. Do we really need another introduction to the New Testament which covers ground that has, seemingly, been covered almost endlessly? Haven't all the issues been discussed ad infinitum? Perhaps that question is best answered by the learned Jimmy Dunn- who writes

"This is not just another 'who wrote, to whom, where, and why' introduction to the New Testament. It is as comprehensive a study of the New Testament writings in the context of Christianity's beginnings as one could wish for in a single volume, including astonishingly full and helpful bibliographies. Don Hagner's *The New Testament* is a showpiece of high-quality evangelical scholarship."<sup>1</sup>

And that, in sum, is the absolute truth. Were this simply another 'who, what, when, and where' it could be set aside but it is significantly more than that. Hagner doesn't simply discuss those basic, and it has to be said, vitally important, questions. He also discusses the 'why' and that, in my opinion, is the most important question of all- as none of the others have any meaning in the absence of that particular one.

The second aspect of Dunn's observation is important as well: this volume is thoroughly Evangelical. It is unabashedly Evangelical (in the best sense of the word). Hagner speaks, then, of inspiration (p. ix), the issue of historicity (pp4ff), and other issues which are important to the Evangelical mindset. Indeed, he spends a bit of time in the first chapter discussing in depth (as one can do in a book over 800 pages in length) 'The Scriptures as historical documents', 'biblical criticism', 'historical method and presuppositions', 'the spurning of the historical-critical method' (which he does not do but rather laments)- as follows

It is perhaps not surprising that even some evangelicals have jumped onto the docetic bandwagon of 'story but not history'. The idea of retaining the Bible's message without having to wrestle with the uncertainties of history is very appealing to them and perhaps reflects a lurking suspicion that the historical basis of Christianity is too fragile to depend upon (p. 8).

He also covers 'postmodernism and historical knowledge', 'historical knowledge and probability', and finally 'the role of faith in the study of Scripture (p. 10).

When it comes to discussing the Biblical texts themselves Hagner follows a simple pattern: a brief introduction to the book in question; a description of the *Sitz im Leben* (my term, not his); a 'fact box' is inserted in these materials which indicates

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<sup>1</sup> - <http://bakerpublishinggroup.com/books/the-new-testament/326730>

authorship, date, addresses, purpose, message/argument, and significance. Finally, each major section of the biblical text at hand is broken down and described and discussed from a theological point of view.

This procedure works quite well and Hagner is meticulous in his attention to detail. He's also a very good interpreter (theological exegete). He is clearly very familiar with both the primary as well as secondary materials. For instance, his bibliography at the conclusion of his treatment of Romans is 7 pages in length, listing books, articles, and commentaries.

And though Hagner is an Evangelical, he is certainly no fundamentalist. He, because of that fact, freely treats Ephesians as 'Deutero-Pauline', following that with a very, very important chapter titled 'The Tendencies of "Early Catholicism"' (pp. 605ff). Here Hagner guides readers through the elements of incipient early Catholicism, incipient early Catholicism in the earlier books of the New Testament, early elements of Christianity in the later New Testament books, and 'A Canon Within the Canon or the Whole New Testament' (p. 612) which may well be the most important subsection in the entire book, even though it's a mere 2 paragraphs long. He writes

We may well be persuaded that Paul's articulation of the gospel is the clearest and most compelling, and that, in this limited sense, Paul serves as a canon within the canon. But there is reason for the emphases of the later books of the NT. The tendencies of incipient early Catholicism have as their purpose the preservation and protection of the gospel from corruption. Incipient early Catholicism is not to be set over against the gospel. Rather than a denial of the gospel, the tendencies of insipient early Catholicism exist for the sake of the gospel and the church (p. 613).

Hagner has provided readers of this volume an actual encyclopedia of New Testament scripture. That's how it should be viewed, and read. Those interested in the development of the canon should read that Part. Those interested in Paul should read that Part. Those engaged in the interpretation of Romans should read the chapter devoted to it. Then, as time and interest permit, the other Parts and chapters should be digested.

If one invests the necessary time in reading through the entire volume one will know the New Testament and its contents as few others do. This volume is an education in itself. *Tolle, lege!*

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